

# Healthy School Meals for All Maryland Coalition



## PURPOSE

*The coalition will advocate and build support for statewide Healthy School Meals for All so that all Maryland schools can offer breakfast and lunch at no charge to all of their students.*

## STATEMENT OF SUPPORT

We know that school meals play an important role in academic success, reducing childhood hunger, supporting good nutrition, and ensuring that students are well-nourished and ready to get the most out of their school day.

Research links participation in school meals to positive education and health outcomes for our nation's children. School meals are just as important to academic success as textbooks, computers, and transportation, and all children should have access to them every school day.

As vital as the school nutrition programs are to ensuring children's access to healthy, nutritious meals, too many children in need miss out on school meals because of the programs' current structure. Many struggling families do not meet the eligibility threshold for no-cost meals, which requires a family of four to earn less than \$55,500 annually. The current structure with some children being offered meals at no cost, and others paying for their meals, also leads many children who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, particularly those in middle and high school, to choose not to participate because of stigma.

Schools were able to offer school meals at no cost to all their students beginning in the spring of 2020 when the pandemic began to sweep the country. School meals were offered at no cost to all students no matter their learning mode – remote, in-person, or hybrid – through the 2021-2022 school year, and were ended despite the ongoing need. This trial run showed how beneficial offering meals at no cost to all students is for children, families, and schools.

Providing meals to all students at no cost, regardless of household income, would reduce stigma and ensure that all students have the nutrition they need during the school day. It would ease the pressure on families' household food budgets, allowing them to count on a nutritious school breakfast and lunch each school day to help make ends meet. It would reduce administrative work for school staff, and it would eliminate unpaid school meal fees, helping to ensure that the cafeteria is a positive place for all students and ending the financial burden that school meal debt creates for school districts.

Providing school meals to all students is also critical for advancing racial equity and justice, helping to ensure that Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students can access the key nutrition they need to thrive in the classroom and beyond.

Hungry kids can't learn. Now is the time for Maryland to make this important investment so that all students have access to the healthy meals they need to thrive.